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FRANCE AND HER VANISHING POPULATION.

BY FREDERIC COURTLAND PENFIELD.

PRESENT-DAY France is confronted by many political and administrative problems; but the problem overshadowing all these is that of her gradually diminishing birth-rate, for never in modern times have vital statistics conveyed a fact that should be more disquieting than the records of the last decade that prove indisputably this waning of population in a grand country.

And in ironical contrast does the science of statistics show that the nation which was once the foe, and is destined ever to be the rival, of France is increasing so positively in numbers that there may soon be two Germans to every Frenchman. To have the fact of racial decay published to the world must be a hundredfold more galling than loss of territory through even inglorious warfare, and the true significance of this monstrous curbing of nature's law is that the cruelest enemies of glorious France are to-day, as they have always been, her own sons and daughters.

Alas, proud France! She who has blazoned history with envied achievements in civilization and culture, and signal triumphs in science and art, is now the first in the family of nations to show a death-rate in excess of the number of births. Twenty years ago the average number of births per marriage was three; it is now scarcely two. And while the vigorous Teutonic blood has increased the German race until the Fatherland averages 256 souls to the square mile, the average for France is but 188.

Winging time has exploded no theory having better semblance of concrete law than that of Thomas Robert Malthus, whose essay a hundred years ago on the "Principles of Population" attracted the widest possible attention. This divine's insistence that the tendency of population to increase in a higher ratio than the means of subsistence—this is the Malthusian doctrine—meant the

general pauperism of the British Isles, if not the starvation of their people; but Malthus made the fatal blunder of not taking into consideration the ability of the British to levy upon the food-supply of the outside world in exchange for the products of their workshops and mines, which policy, when adopted, made the nation rich and powerful. What remained of the scholarly Englishman's theory is now hopelessly destroyed by the lessening birth-rate of France coincidently with the augmentation of the soil's productivity through scientific tillage and the employment of machinery.

Unpopular as it is for a Frenchman to herald national calamity, M. de Foville, President of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, has recently accentuated the gravity of his country's position in a style so plain that the Latin countries are discussing what students of international affairs have long known—that the French race is slowly but surely dying. For twenty years the birth-rate has been waning; two years ago it was on a parity with the death-rate, and last year it fell 20,000 behind. In a hundred years it has decreased from 32 per thousand to 19.7; and in the twentieth century the decline has followed this alarming pace: excess of births over deaths, 1902, 84,000; 1903, 73,000; 1904, 57,000; 1905, 37,000; 1906, 27,000. In 1907 zero was reached and passed, for there were 20,000 more deaths than births, as has been stated. The official returns are 794,000 and 774,000 under these respective heads. The word "depopulation," M. de Foville points out, is, therefore, no exaggeration. "Is it," he asks, with pardonable apprehension, "the beginning of the end?"

At this rate, the Gallic republic may soon be ripe for invasion, for this will be a danger frankly menacing a country which is capable of supporting 80,000,000 inhabitants, but which is content with less than half that number. In 1875, the population of Germany surpassed that of France by only 6,000,000; it now exceeds it by over 20,000,000. In another twenty years there may be two Germans for every Frenchman, without counting the subjects of the Kaiser swarming in Brazil, Argentina and the United States. M. de Foville has thus had the courage to tell his fellow countrymen that their nation is "marching with quickened step to its doom."

If there was no French immigration there would be a more decided census recession, but the Germans, Swiss, Italians and

Belgians, who for years have been flocking into France, rescue the totals from a more disquieting significance than they now have. Another generation of man-power in Germany, it can be plainly estimated, will have prodigious force, not alone giving her double the number of conscripts available to France, but a material force in commerce with which France cannot readily cope. "Then she will devour us," say French alarmists.

As almost any topic can be argued from varying standpoints, a few English economists pretend to doubt the general pessimism of those writing on the diminution of the French people, and are asking, "Is the example which France presents to be looked upon as a reach forward to a better dispensation, or as a sign of yielding in the fight for existence?" All countries, more or less, are discussing some aspect or other of the population question, as ancient a problem as mankind itself. But, while most people can regard the falling birth-rate of France only as a token of decay, it is curious to learn that some of the best philosophical thought of the day sees for the Frenchman of the future a person of better understanding, better fibre, better culture and better endowment in material things. And some of these economists are arguing that race suicide, in the sense of a deliberate limitation of population to the means of subsistence and to a definite standard of living, is not, when practised by a people instead of by a small and well-to-do class, to be construed as necessarily a sign of degeneration, but rather as the starting-point of a higher civilization.

But while academicians may upon these lines make out a very good case, France herself should be more disturbed than exalted by the success of her experiment. "More deliberately and completely than any other country she cuts her garment according to her cloth, she regulates her population by her resources and her well-worn social arrangements," is the comment of a foreign writer who seems to approve the French population policy.

Of all European nations she is perhaps the most placid, prosperous and provident, has been the most deeply civilized; and she is still all this, in her judgment, because the most strictly limited. No American and but few persons of Anglo-Saxon blood can probably be found who would endorse the principle of birth control, or who would, for reasons of property division, go to the inhuman length of approving of small families. The idea, happily, is wholly French.

Thrift, the essence and foundation of the current French character, is responsible for the controlled birth-rate. This is the only opinion that can be arrived at by the fair-minded investigator when he finds incorporated in the country's legal code the provision of forced equal testamentary division of property which is responsible for the contracting France. And this is but a roundabout way of saying "greed," and the greed that can only be spelled with a large G.

Moralists allege other reasons—laxity of the laws that control those following the vocation of *sage-femme*, whose advertisements fearlessly hint at criminal practices; and the ridiculous ease with which divorce is obtainable—it is a fact that there is a decided increase in the severance of matrimonial ties as the birth-rate decreases. Last year the courts of France granted nearly eleven thousand divorces, the highest number ever recorded.

Other apologists claim that the development of France as a manufacturing country draws the young of both sexes from agricultural districts to the cities and towns, where familiar intercourse and pernicious teachings, assisted by a base class of publications, corrupt thousands and divert them from marriage. The growing burden of taxation is only one of many other explanations, and in this connection it is pointed out that recent legislation has imposed increasingly harder conditions on the breadwinner with a family to support. The new income tax, for instance, makes no distinction between the bachelor and the married man with a numerous progeny.

Devout Catholics insist that the breach between Government and Church has been the controlling influence in lowering the birth-rate, for it used to be the teaching of pastor and curate that it was the sacred duty of every God-fearing husband and wife to bring into existence a family of goodly number. Others argue with equal effect that the love of luxury that has sprung up in recent years is making the men and women of France selfish to an inordinate degree, too selfish to share their time and substance with children.

All these explanations are trivial and secondary, for the actual reason is the racial thrift of the people—the same thrift which enabled the French to easily satisfy the German war indemnity which to other countries would have been of paralyzing weight, which makes their hoarded savings a fiscal fact having no national

counterpart, and which makes France the banker of Europe. And thrift of a certain kind is nothing but greed, surely.

Defenders of current French conditions insist that it is only natural that a prudent parent, whose competence has resulted from a long practice of economy, should prefer to leave one or two children comparatively well off rather than to have the family nest-egg apportioned among six or eight. The law preventing anything but a *pro rata* division, there can be no special provision for an elder son or an invalid, no material acknowledgment of primogeniture, or for a son or daughter of exceptional promise or sentimental attachment, it will be seen. And further, these oracles say that French law is but the concrete form of popular will, thereby giving support to the contention that the people want it as it now is. Anybody having intimate acquaintance with France well knows that it is as natural for Jacques and Marie to economize as to breathe, and that the controlling article of faith of the *bourgeois* class prescribes thrift, constantly and in every form. Thus, the American may readily perceive, the French law of bequest is a check as effective upon the birth-rate as the invention of Westinghouse is a check upon the speed of the railway train.

When obliged to divide his property equally among his children, and when he knows that the same restriction will be applied to their children when their turn comes, the citizen of France usually elects to have a limited family. The dowry system, again, operates in the same direction. Everywhere an additional child means additional expense; in France it means an extra dowry as well, and that is an added reason why the French have few children. So long as the present property law exists, and the dowry custom obtains, there can be no "solution" of French depopulation. France is manifestly deriving from her inheritance policy an immense diffusion of prosperity, and certain publicists are applauding the national policy, and boldly asserting that it is more than wise to promote greater equality in the distribution of wealth.

There is no other country in the world where the soil is so subdivided as it is in France. But it is a sad fact that of late years the rural districts have been deserted for the cities. Thoughtful politicians are now trying to form a plan for getting the population "back to the land." A few months since a measure passed

the Chamber giving rural laborers an opportunity to acquire on easy terms a plot of tillable land and a homestead. The plan is just going into operation, and its advocates insist that it will insure better provision for the evening of life than any old-age pension scheme. Any measure which will bring the people into a state of pastoral comfort is bound to help the birth-rate.

No urgent reason exists why the American woman who annually loads up with the wares of the Rue de la Paix should lose her head after reading about race decline in *La Belle France*. The people to whom the world turns for creations in frocks and hats and fluffy things, so irresistible to the fashionable woman with the portly pocketbook, is perennial; and the man too fastidious to wear any but made-to-order Doucet cravats can have his commands filled until the crack of doom, probably. It is safe to believe that there will always be French people to barter their taste and handiwork for the sound American dollar. And France will always be inhabited, surely, even in defiance of the croakings of economists and paraded dry-as-dust figures!

To a Christian people living in a free land, the judgment that French thrift is being carried to the point of inhumanity must surely obtain, and when the current page of French history is read it will be admitted that President Roosevelt's preachment against race suicide was not altogether idle talk.

One may *see* the falling off in the number of French children. For twenty years I have known the country fairly well, and in the past two summers I have traversed six or seven thousand miles of French roads, from frontier to frontier in almost every direction. The foremost observation of the motorist is naturally the peerless thoroughfares, but the secondary observation must be the infrequency with which children are seen on the road or in front of habitations. In provincial France, as in other European countries away from the centres of population, the highway is the natural playground of children of the peasant class. Roads in Italy and Germany bristle with juvenile life; but France is no sooner entered than a tremendous falling off is noticed. The observant traveller by automobile surely comprehends what is meant by the phrase "French depopulation"—he sees it. And in Germany, on the other hand, he must ever have in mind Bismarck's assertion that "she is the best mother who gives the Fatherland the greatest number of children," for he

will have constant evidence of the people's endorsement of the Great Chancellor's opinion.

It is the daughters of France who suffer most from a critical study of the nation's plight. The Frenchwoman must not be confounded with the "Parisienne" or with the rarefied types of femininity seen by the tourist in Paris restaurant or park—these exotics are wickedly wasteful. The truly representative and valued Frenchwoman is she of the great middle class, who is conscientious and industrious, neither frivolous nor impure, who dresses with taste upon half what her sisters of other lands spend, and who is her husband's helpmate as few women can be. But she is, in the very nature of things, mercenary and avaricious, and from economical motives has permitted herself to drift into an environment peopled only by the narrow-minded and self-centred. She knows little of the world beyond the limits of her own vision.

Yet this woman is nearly always a good wife, pious and prudent, but her thoughts seldom stray from her savings, and what she means to do for Louis, proposing to leave the Corps d'Afrique because he can never hope to win the cross of the Legion of Honor; or for *petite* Hortense, who, if the *dot* be large enough, may marry a young wine broker down Bordeaux way whose rich father can easily get the red ribbon for him in ten years. *Voilà!*

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